THE LOGIC OF E-DELIBERATION PARTICIPATION BEYOND CIVIL SOCIETY

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The logic of e-deliberation exceeds the narrow limits of the so-called "expansion of the public sphere" which did not lead to the widening of the decision-making processes, which are still run by designated groups. It suggests an opening of the policy-making procedure through electronic discussion forums. Having also in mind state's need for legitimation (as particular reason for organizing public deliberations), it can be suggested that e-deliberation's dimensions could lead to the broadening of participation referring to a remarkable group of people beyond civil society. Therefore, a two-way model consisted from the dimensions of the two basic facets of e-deliberation: Virtual Participation and Potential influence in Decision-Making, is proposed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Internet's use spread was coupled with a utopian ideology model about the liberating role of the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) concerning democracy's stakes. In this context, e-Democracy's issues were set, from the first moment, in relation with the problem of e-Participation. The internet researchers and scholars, and a part of civil society networks, had already made clear that participation is not enough; deliberation is also needed. Therefore, the idea of deliberative democracy was brought out as a demand for further expansion of taking part in the procedure of decision-making.

It is widely accepted that the new social movements and the Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), as part of civil society, could use the horizontal, networked structure of internet for the formation of a new public sphere vis-à-vis the state and the market, according to the principles of Habermasian discourse theory (Carsten Stahl 2005). Yet civil society agents put emphasis on networks and the empowerment of organized moves and movements and they seem reluctant as to the broadening of ICTs beyond its boundaries. No doubt, ICTs make easier for a lust of individual citizens to participate in the new public sphere irrespective of whether they belong to civil society organizations or not.

2. THE ON-LINE ENVIRONMENT

However, it should not be forgotten that the policy makers in representative democracies are exceptionally hesitant to share their power with citizens via the use of Internet in forums and deliberations. The so-called "expansion of the public sphere"

did not lead to the widening of the decision-making processes, which are still run by designated groups.

The logic of e-deliberation exceeds these narrow limits. In modern, media saturated societies' participation in the new public sphere is marked by individualization and cynicism. At any rate, these characteristics discourage classical activation through social associations. Having also in mind state's need for legitimation (as particular reason for organizing public deliberations), it can be suggested that e-deliberation's dimensions could lead to the broadening of participation referring to a remarkable group of people beyond civil society and its organized forms. It is notable, that everyone who does not *actively participate in civil society* consists in a way, hidden Social Capital which can be reclaimed through e-deliberation.

E-citizens are indeed empowered citizens and the strengthening of civil society because of the Internet's use is "self-evident" for some. On the other hand, some argue that e-deliberations and electronic discussions forums might undermine any public dialogue and action that would be realized in the context of civil society in any case. According to this logic, internet's use does not contribute in the democratization of a society but in the weakening of civil society.

On the contrary, others support that the potential of the new means is encouraging. However, there is an *"absence of procedural definition developments"* (Hands 2005). This means that there is a general sense and wish for attendance and opening of processes in parallel with the optimism that internet can offer this opportunity, *"but not what this would entail in practice"* (Hands 2005). In other words, while consent exists in the central objective of acquisition of access in the internet for all, in order to exploit effectively the possibilities of internet for democratic reasons, there is ambiguity in regard to which precisely e-democracy, and particularly which deliberation, *"does, could and should, entail"* (Hands 2005).

Bregman points out correctly that in the off-line world the motive and the need to live in societies lead to the adoption of deliberative discourse. However, this argument is not in effect in the same way in the internet. Users of internet are forced to follow the decisions that affect everyone and to deliberate continuously for these issues (eg the decisions regarding the administration of Domain Name System). For this reason, the base of our approach should be placed as follows: The interaction between humans that can be realized either through a computer or via airwaves does not recommend consultation. Nevertheless, it does recommend the base for deliberation and this is the basic principal that should not be forgotten (Strommer-Galley 2000).

3. PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE FROM E-DELIBERATIONS

In this frame, skepticism has arisen about the fact that deliberative processes cannot be finished in the internet. This occurs because internet, at least in its present form, remains text based while on the other side the optical and verbal expression in the face-to-face (f2f) discussion remains an open and familiar process for those participating (Fishkin). While the advocates of possibilities that internet could offer, such the re-engagement of cynical citizens, support that civil society and public sphere are partly revived via this new technology, skeptics show the *"anarchic nature of much Internet discourse, which tends be aggressive, fragmented and*

confrontational" (Margolis and Resnick 2000 as mentioned in Hurrell 2005). The aggressive indeed pillar of discourse that prevails in the on-line discussion has been reported as the most important obstacle for consultation and open dialogue, which are essential for an effective public sphere (Hurrell 2005).

Many think that the *"predominance of aggressive and inflammatory rhetoric"* can destroy the efforts for a public and open deliberation, while others have supported that this kind of discussion is natural and even cathartic (Hurrell 2005). For Muhlberger (2005), on-line discussion decreases "vertical collectivism" - an authoritarian placement that it is characterized by stealth democratic convictions. As vertical collectivists are considered those who believe that they should sacrifice their particular needs or interests in favor of team's interests. Results from The Virtual Agora Project, show that on-line discussion decreases stealth democracy beliefs (Muhlberger 2005).

According to social identity theory, if citizenship is not pointed out constantly in on-line discussion, the participants of the deliberation will behave *"fiercely individualistic"*, while a recall of citizenship pulls out citizens' obligations against the community (Muhlberger 2005). The recall of citizenship develops on-line participation into a process that does not always require special handling for the quality of dialogue - we have always in our mind the raised issue of hate speech in internet. The perception of learning many and useful things from a team discussion appears to be an objective characteristic of team discussions which lead to positive results. Various clues from research suggest that on-line citizenship condition can strengthen participants' community-mindedness (Muhlberger 2005).

Therefore, an engagement for the adoption of civil discourse in addition with the logic of citizenship, helps the achievement of shared meanings, which are crucial for deliberation. Civil speech seems to allow participants discuss with relatively equal terms on issues of reciprocal importance. However, civil dialogue does not ensure itself effective communication between citizens and government. This civil dialogue culture can come naturally during deliberation, but also it can also be cultivated from moderators (Hurrell 2005).

Participants in a research maintained civil dialogue, both in on-line and f2f discussion, by adopting various techniques of negotiation (which are usually adopted in all the types of political discourse); a central characteristic of civility. This is because civility means acceptance of negotiation, engagement to reject prevalence and exclusion, and respect in dialogue and in potential change. In addition, another negotiation technique that is adopted successfully from participants in public forums is the confirmation or even rejection of an opponent's statement, which shows self-restraint - a characteristic of civility for some scholars (Hurrell 2005).

In any case, experience shows that reasoned discussion takes place when participants recognize that their discussion will lead either to a voting or to some other decision-making process. Voting, but also any decision-making process is more credible if a detailed discussion for the controversial subject had occurred. Accordingly, if the ideal of reasoned, collaborative decision-making is to be achieved, software should incorporate discussion and voting in a single total. Software should consequently seek to achieve a unified environment of discussion and decision-making (Edelman).

Additionally, in on-line environment where people who do not know each other try to discuss important issues without any previous and specific knowledge, an "on-line reputation" for a participant is a key point in order to provide an additional motive and guarantee for the other participants to begin a dialogue with him. Quoting, for example, is a method which helps to establish an "on-line reputation" as careful reader of others' (Hurrell 2005).

It is noteworthy that the above concern the stage of deliberation where participants have already chosen to attend the process. This is mentioned, because the problem of gathering different persons and disparate personalities in internet remains. But even when web activities achieve to bring persons with very different perceptions near, it does not be accomplished to provide the means for better understanding between the users who communicate in order to promote an issue of common interest (Friedman 2006).

This constitutes an additional reason why innovations in internet-based engagement, besides their attractiveness, are adopted more often in the service of *"traditional partisan politics"* (Friedman 2006). That is why *"deliberation will have its greatest value if established on a foundation of broad online citizen engagement across the whole of civil society"* (Clift). Internet's use can maintain the current level of participatory democracy but this should not be considered as the main alternative because the use of Internet "as it is", could accelerate or strengthen existing negative tendencies in political participation. Steven Clift clarifies, at this point, that *"ongoing local forums for online citizen engagement may be one of the most cost-effective investments toward deepening or at least keeping democracy being the right path"*.

According to Lukensmeyer and Torres' (2006, p. 45) research there are two important parameters which decrease the "uptake of online engagement activities". Firstly, e-government initiatives give particular importance in providing services for the "citizen as customer". But this contributes in the mapping out of an e-government strategy that "sidelines meaningful citizen engagement". Secondly, a lack of common ways of e-action and of on-line engagement techniques creates confusion for both citizens and those who organize open and public e-Deliberations.

Fishkin, Luskin and Iyengar point out that things would be very different if - due to technical possibilities - concrete on-line deliberation could last more than the f2f - a placement that restores the discussion about the digital gap. It appears however that the 2 models of deliberation (f2f and on-line) have generally similar results, on-line deliberation's though are "slightly weaker". *"The chief disadvantage is that the deliberation may be less vivid and the experimental treatment thus weaker, than in the face-to-face design"* (Fishkin and Luskin). However, the combination of f2f and electronic processes offers often the best result: direct and personal contact without the danger of excluding those who do not have access in certain technology, but with the parallel possibility of including many more persons and with less cost (Dialogue by Design).

Social and psychological researchers (Muhlberger 2005) have been speculating about the possible negative repercussions of deliberation (eg intensity of conflicts in the team, polarized opinions, lawful conformity in the team, exaggerating influence from

socially powerful people and sentimentally prompted results). It is likely that firsthand human interaction in f2f processes leads to increase of participation and engagement (eg an erotic attraction might mobilize a participant) and in a more completely information transfer. From another point of view, these characteristics may not function entirely in favor of f2f deliberations because computer mediated interactions in e-deliberation are *"emotionally cooler, more cognitive, and perhaps that is the good"* (Fishkin, Luskin and Iyengar).

4. A THEORETICAL SCHEME AND SOME RESULTS

A proposition about a two-way scheme is consisted from the dimensions that have to do with the two basic facets of e-deliberation:

<div align="center">

Virtual   Potential influence

Participation   ⟷   in Decision-Making

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The above developed theoretical scheme regarding e-deliberation, is in the same direction with the theoretical approaches and the past experiences that have already been mentioned in this article and has to do with the up to now results of the unfinished research.

From one side, there is the dimension of Virtual Participation, because in the particular case of e-deliberation we do not have the traditional political participation through a collective formation. It is the predominance of the concept of individualization that characterizes modern societies and places under contestation the principle according to which political action has as precondition the existence of collective motivations and social groups. Moreover, classical political action declines because internet allows the formation of "fluid identities", does not encourage the engagement and cultivates the hallucination of participation.

On the other side, the decreasing undertaking of responsibility and risk in combination with the decreased levels of empathy that undermine the engagement and the participation in the on-line environment, are opposed with the other dimension of the above-mentioned model, the possibility of influencing the process of decision-making process. It is in other words, the essential motive of having probabilities in participating in the policy shaping appears to run through the logic of citizens who come to participate out of their own will in the open, public electronic dialogues.

As far as the research is concerned, the comparative analysis among 4 open electronic discussion forums - which apparently have not finished yet - for the forthcoming Constitutional Revision in Greece. The first forum is held by the party that is now in power (New Democracy; the second by the Association of Greek Industries; the third by a team of independent scientists and scholars and the fourth by an organizational came up by the initiative of 700 NGOs for the constitutional consolidation of civil society, called "Campaign: NGOs for Constitution".

The results up to now can be summarized as follows:
1. The party's (New Democracy) forum has been the one with the greatest participation. This can be attributed to the fact that this is the institution that will determine the results of the Constitutional. Most of the participants deposited more than once their opinions, element that reveals a certain adherence in the dialogue.

2. The participation in the Association's of Greek Industries forum has not been as intense as in the first one but a remarkable participation has been pointed out.
3. The participation in the other 2 forum has been dominated by people who were expected to express their opinions in public dialogue (through articles, participation through NGOs etc.). Specifically, the forum of the independent scientists and scholars turned out to be more like a scientific on-line community. The dialogue that has occurred has been characterized by the absence of willing to influence the organizers of the dialogue and the establishment of extensive on-line discussions between two or three different participants depending on the subjects. On the other hand, the pre-taken decision to promote the constitutional consolidation of civil society at the forum of the "Campaign: NGOs for Constitution" undermined their own public on-line dialogue.
4. Finally, the participants in the first forum, mostly common citizens representing themselves, have expressed at some point their wish for it to succeed by the government's considering their opinions when forming its final positions. The majority though of the placements appear to be functional as far as the party's basic approach to the Constitutional Revision is concerned.

In a country where e-deliberation is in a very primitive level - even deliberation in its traditional form is not widely practiced due to the weak civil society and the absence of serious public dialogue - the results of these particular deliberations will be judged not by the end of these 4 forums, but by the participation in others that will be held in the future. Regardless the deliberations' results, *"if the technology can be harnessed to return deliberation to the mass public, then a qualitatively new kind of democracy may be possible"* (Fishkin).

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